

FEMA

BOUCHER INTRODUCES LEGISLATION TO IMPROVE NATIONAL PREPAREDNESS DURING TIMES OF DISASTER

Legislation Would Restore FEMA as an Independent, Expert-Led Agency

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(Washington, D.C.) - U.S. Representative Rick Boucher this week joined with 47 other House members in introducing legislation to improve the operations of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The National Emergency Management Improvement Act would restore FEMA as an independent federal agency, led by experts in emergency management, that reports directly to the President regarding natural disaster and terrorist situations.

"The failure of our federal emergency agencies to respond adequately and in a timely manner to the extreme damage inflicted by Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast region highlights the disturbing state of our nation's emergency preparedness. It is vital that we have in place a system to respond immediately to a terrorist attack or natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes and floods. Our nation's federal response to Hurricane Katrina last week shows that we are at present unprepared for a national disaster of any sort," Boucher said.

If enacted, the National Emergency Management Improvement Act would remove FEMA from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and restore it as a fully independent agency. These actions would clearly designate FEMA as the nation's primary federal agency for national emergency preparedness. In addition, the Director of FEMA would be required to report directly to the President to facilitate appropriate coordination between FEMA and other agencies and departments and to delineate a clear line of responsibility and accountability between the Agency and the office of the President.

The proposed measure would require that the Director of FEMA be an emergency management professional trained and experienced to handle the magnitude and breadth of a national disaster such as Hurricane Katrina or a large terrorist attack. The legislation would also create two Deputy Director positions within FEMA: one for natural disaster preparedness and one for terrorism related disasters. Each Deputy Director would be required to have significant experience and knowledge related to his or her respective position. The Deputy Director in charge of terrorism related disaster management would be required to consult and coordinate with the Department of Homeland Security to ensure that national preparedness is maintained.

Boucher noted that the enactment of the National Emergency Management Improvement Act would reinstitute the organizational structure that made FEMA successful under President Clinton and Director James Lee Witt. "Under the Clinton administration, FEMA was made a cabinet level agency which had the authority and resources to respond to natural disasters. When President Bush established and organized the Department of Homeland Security, much of FEMA's authority was delegated to state and local authorities. As we are seeing now in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, this was a grave mistake due to the lack of resources which state and local governments possess to effectively respond to such an overwhelming natural disaster," he said.

Since FEMA's absorption into the Department of Homeland Security, the agency has lost much of its focus on providing assistance during traditional disaster situations. "Under the Bush administration, FEMA's mission has shifted from responding and providing relief during a domestic natural disaster to terrorist threats with a largely international focus, leaving state and local officials to prepare for domestic disaster events. While a retooling of our federal emergency response was undoubtedly necessary after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the result has been a total breakdown in our government's emergency response infrastructure. Given the events of the last two weeks, it is clear that we are in no way prepared to deal with the aftermath of either a natural disaster or a terrorist attack," Boucher added.

"The residents of Southwest Virginia in the past have had to rely on FEMA and other federal agencies during times of natural disaster. Unfortunately, the time may come again when we will need to rely on the help of the federal government. The restoration of FEMA as an independent and expert-led federal agency is paramount in ensuring that the federal response to a disaster is sufficient and appropriate to meet the needs of Americans faced with rebuilding their lives after a natural disaster," Boucher concluded.